

but we could be safer for just one day by dragonyfox

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Gen, Monster of the Week, Multi, Post Season 2, Rotating POV, anyway, im not putting that in the ship tags tho bc i dont wanna clutter the tag when its a side ship, literal children, side pairing of nancy/steve/jonathan, there will be nothing more than kissing or hands under shirts here okay, theyre kids, well monster of the year more like but point stands, will tag as i update

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Max/Lucas Sinclair

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-05

Updated: 2017-12-06

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:14:11

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 15

Words: 20,157

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

See, the thing is, they figured they were done. Done with monsters, done with baseball bats embedded with nails, done with lighting things that are trying to kill them on fire, done with worrying about their people.

Things go back to normal.

But they aren't done with monsters.
(NaNoWriMo project 2017)

1. prologue

See, the thing is, they figured they were done. Done with monsters, done with baseball bats embedded with nails, done with lighting things that are trying to kill them on fire, done with worrying about their people.

And yet. The kids hardly slept without a party member near, and slept in shifts even then. Steve kept his bat in the backseat. Jonathan and Nancy both carried lighters. Joyce and Hopper worried incessantly about the kids and the teenagers.

They all, even the kids and teenagers, worried about Eleven and Will the most, for a while. They stopped after Eleven tore a fat and tall tree out of the ground, roots and all, and Will punched a bully in the face hard enough to make both his fist and the bully's face bleed.

(Steve was the only one who really didn't worry about the kids. He'd seen first-hand how tough they were: Dustin with D'art, Lucas and Max with the demodogs, Will during the mind flayer, Mike after Eleven disappeared, and Eleven with her whole... Thing.)

The boys and Max went to the last semester of middle school. Nancy and Jonathan finished their junior year of high school. Steve finished his senior year. Joyce went back to her supermarket job. Hopper went back to normal police things, like giving idiot teenagers tickets and investigating noise complaints from old ladies. Eleven went back to her and Hopper's cabin in the woods, and waited each day for the boys and sometimes Max to show up after school.

Summer hit, and they introduced Eleven to Hawkins as Hopper's adoptive daughter. His coworkers had razed him some about not telling them, and he played the suddenness off as not wanting to get his own hopes up. He never had to bring up the daughter he'd lost.

Eleven "met" the boys (except for Mike, of course, because everyone had seen him dance with her during the Snow Ball) when Hopper brought her to the arcade, and nobody there questioned the weird girl who hung out with the nerds. Later, someone would question why they called her Eleven instead of Jane, and they'd laugh and shrug it off as an inside joke from a nerdy movie.

The kids did D&D every week, on Saturdays, El and Max included. El rolled a mage, and Max tried to roll a zoomer but the boys convinced her to roll as a barbarian instead. Mike was the designated DM and began building homebrew games after Will and Eleven got quiet too many times during the campaigns he'd gotten from the manuals.

The teenagers met up every week as well, on Saturdays, to study. They studied both school subjects and weird happenings around the states. Nancy in particular had discovered an obsessive need to know if it was just Hawkins where strange things happened or if there were other places as well. Jonathan was on board with her eventual plan to hunt down any monsters that might appear across the country. Steve was too, but he also made sure that his friends and the kids ate and slept enough, and didn't get up to too much nonsense without him.

Joyce and Hopper met up for drinks at her house on Saturdays. They'd drink to forget, but never too much, just in case there was a new Code Red. But they relaxed as best they could, and gossiped

about the kids and the teenagers and the rest of the townsfolk.

Things go back to normal.

But they aren't done with monsters.

2. Eleven

Notes for the Chapter:

Did you know that Spotify has playlists for most of the Stranger Things characters? Here's Eleven's:
<https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWU7l3L90SEct>

Eleven looks on impassively as her peers flooded into the high school she'd never been in before Hopper- Dad, she was supposed to call him, now- had brought her there to pick up her class schedule.

Three bikes pulled up beside her on the sidewalk. She didn't move, not even when one nearly ran her foot over. She knew these boys knew their bikes well enough to not hit her, and even if they did, she'd be able to stop them long before they did any damage. Her powers hadn't gone away when she'd closed that "giant fucking hole in the dirt" as Hopper- Dad- called it.

That had been months ago, now. She could hardly believe it. A semester and a summer ago, she'd nearly killed herself closing a giant rip between universes. She'd been laid up in bed for days, and weak for weeks after. She'd made it to the Snow Ball just fine, but she'd needed rest often, when all she wanted was to dance with Mike. It had taken her until summer to be able to pick up and move anything larger than a D&D figurine, and until midsummer to be back at the level of power she was used to. She still hadn't managed to move a car again yet, but she was working on it.

"Hey, El," Mike said. He always sounded so soft when he spoke to her. She liked it.

"Hey, weirdo," Lucas said. He always sounded so harsh, but playful. She liked that, too.

She already knew which classes she shared with each of her friends. (Homeroom with Will and Max. Math with Lucas and Dustin. Science with all of them. Home Ec with Mike, Max, and Dustin. PE with Max. History with Dustin and Max. She even had the same lunch period as Will and Mike.)

"Hello, friends," she said.

Hopper- Dad- had taken her to a speech therapist. She could talk "normally" if she wanted to, and if she put the effort into it, but she didn't usually want to, so she didn't. Her friends and Hopper- Dad- knew what she was saying. Why should she put in the effort to speak differently when she was with people who understood her?

She watched while they locked up their bikes, and as Will and Max joined them. Joyce waved at the two before she drove away.

"You ready for this, Eleven?" Will asked.

She looked him in the eye the way Hopper taught her to. "Of course."

Will smiled at her. She liked his smile. It was crooked and showed just one tooth, a sharp one. He didn't smile often, though. She figured it was because of the Upside Down, and she couldn't fault him that. She didn't smile much either.

She walked with him to homeroom. Mike had to bolt to his classroom because he said that Nancy said that the teacher was very strict. Max was hunting down her locker, which was further from her homeroom than anyone else's, so when she and Will arrived in homeroom, they were the only two there.

"How are you?" Will asked.

She frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged and fiddled with his backpack. "I mean, like, you usually look okay, but you're hard to read. I can't tell if you're doing okay or just faking it, and uh, Jonathan, he said that if I couldn't tell, I should just ask. So. How are you?"

"I'm..." she paused, and thought. Friends don't lie.

She was frustrated that her power wasn't coming back quickly. She was sick of being tired. She didn't like that Hopper made her eat mushy peas. She hated that she still felt like something was going to happen soon. She didn't really like being called "Jane" because it sounded weird in Mike's mouth.

But at the same time, she was delighted to have friends. She loved playing D&D as the boys' mage. She liked Max, even, once she'd gotten over her jealousy- a word she'd learned from Nancy, who told her it was okay to be jealous as long as she wasn't mean about it. She liked that Will asked her how she was doing without being

overbearing like Dustin, or painfully fake-casual like Lucas. She liked Mike.

“I’m good,” she decided.

Will nodded. “Me too, I think. It’s hard to tell sometimes.”

Neither of them wanted to bring up the nightmares they shared of the Upside Down. Eleven had dealt with it for years indirectly, and Will had lived there for a few weeks and been possessed by the Mind Flayer.

She liked Will, but she liked Mike more. She’d asked Nancy about it, trying to understand. Someone had told Eleven that the closest relationships are built on shared trauma. Mike helped her more, but Will had a shared trauma. Nancy had laughed a little, but not in a mean way, and said that if she didn’t figure it out by homecoming she’d explain then.

As more students entered the homeroom, Eleven became aware that they were all staring or sneaking glances at her. She wasn’t surprised. She was sitting with Will, who was still the smallest of their friends and wearing what she’d come to learn as “nerd fashion”, and she was wearing the oversized jacket and wristbands that Kali had given her. It was comfortable, and felt like armor. The makeup, however, she went without, because she didn’t know how it worked and Hopper had asked her to wait a while before going too crazy with her “MTV punk” look.

She gave her best blank expression that Kali’s friend Mick had called

her “bitchface.” She’d heard from Jonathan that high schoolers weren’t always nice. He’d told her that he’d been bullied in high school, and that Will might be too, and said that she was best suited to fend bullies away from her friends. She had agreed, and hadn’t needed to swear to protect his brother or any of her friends. It was what she did.

“Byers,” a boy said. He had blonde hair and was wearing a very ugly polo shirt. “Who’s this? A new nerd freak friend of yours?”

Will, predictably, opens his mouth to defend her. She appreciates it, but she can handle this, and so she does.

“Yes,” Eleven said. “I am. Do you have a problem?”

That’s a phrase she learned from Steve. He said that saying “Do you have a problem?” would either start a fight or make whoever she was saying it to back off. And if there was a fight, of course, she’d win, so it was a good phrase for her to learn.

The boy with the ugly polo looked her up and down. She continued giving him her best bitchface. In the corner of her eye, she could see that Will was grinning, and let the corner of her mouth pull up just a smidge.

The boy scoffed then, and turned around without saying another word.

“El, that was super badass,” Will said with a weird look in his eye. She thought the expression might be defined as “admiring,” but she wasn’t certain. She’d have to look it up later.

“Thanks,” she replied.

The teacher entered then, and began doing homeroom things. Eleven paid attention to everything the woman, Mrs. Jackson, said. She wanted to do well in school, and at least pretend to be normal in some way.

“And, last but not least, there’s a new student in Hawkins! Miss Hopper, would you mind coming up here?”

Eleven could tell that she’d been coached on how to talk to her based on the very specific instruction and the tone of voice that meant that the teacher thought she was an idiot. She hated when people took Hopper’s- Dad’s- warning the wrong way. She wasn’t stupid, she just needed specific instructions and more detailed explanations sometimes. She grew up in a lab, not in a neighborhood. She didn’t know how anything worked, but she was learning.

She walked up to the front of the class.

“Introduce yourself, dear,” the teacher said.

“My name is Jane Hopper,” she said monotonously (she’d learned that word from Jonathan, who told her that people would think she

was weird because of the way she spoke, and he'd added that he should know, because he spoke like that too sometimes).

The teacher waited a long moment before sighing and saying, "Thank you, Miss Hopper, you may sit. Now..."

Eleven returned to her seat and received a hand on her arm from Will, which she appreciated. She still wasn't fond of speaking a lot, and Will understood.

She spent the rest of the class period listening and idly picking at the rust on her metal desk.

3. Mike & Will

Notes for the Chapter:

Mike's playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWTYjq3bPY19>

Will's playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DXdX1YdIBJu4K>

"What, exactly, does it say about my life," Will asked Mike, "if it feels like nothing really matters now that I've been possessed by a demon from another dimension and then had it exorcised? Like, all of this normal stuff we're doing? School, having a social life, preparing for college? It all feels weird now that I'm not like..."

Neither of them said "trapped in the Upside Down" or "hurling up demon slugs" or "possessed by the literal embodiment of evil."

Mike snorted. "It says that your life, and the rest of ours by extension is weird, man. I'm dating the real-world equivalent of Jean Grey, Dustin raised a hellhound, my sister is dating your brother and our extra mom who is actually a dude who's only a few years older than us. Everything's weird, man."

"You shit-talking me, you little bastards?"

Mike and Will grinned at each other, turned to Steve, and at the same time in the same tone said, "Mom!"

Steve winced. "I hate when you two do that. It's creepy."

Will put on a wounded expression that Mike knew was false from years of being his best friend. "Are you saying I'm creepy? Is it because I was possessed? That wasn't my fault, Steve!"

Mike instinctively joined in on the teasing. "Steve! For shame, man! He went through a lot of shit, and that's how you're going to treat him? For fuck's sake, man, he was possessed!"

"No!" Steve blurted, raising his hands, "No, no, that's not- I mean- No, you're- I-!"

"I can't believe this," Will said, turning away slightly and hitching his breath.

Mike swallowed down a snicker and instead glared at Steve. "Jesus, Steve."

Steve grabbed at his perfect hair, which was only going to make it look more perfectly disheveled. "Shit, no, I meant-! Will, you're not creepy, but- No, that doesn't sound right, shit, I mean-!"

As he sputtered, trying to correct the mistake he thought he made, the laugh that Mike had so valiantly been fighting bubbled out, which ruined Will's wounded expression by making him laugh as

well. "Your face, man, oh my god!"

Will punched him in the shoulder. "Mike, you asshole, you ruined it! I was working on getting him to bribe me!"

Steve scowled at them. Neither of the boys minded. It had been so long since they'd been able to play off each other so perfectly. After Will had disappeared, he'd been so quiet and distant, and after he'd had the Mind Flayer exorcised from him, he'd been out of practice with joking around.

"He'd have figured it out in like, five more seconds, dude!" Mike said, leaning out of Will's reach.

"It's the principle of the matter!"

Steve huffed and turned away. "Fine, then, I'm not driving you idiots down to Taco Bell. It'll be just me and your punk-ass girlfriend, Mike!"

Steve was there to take them to Taco Bell? Mike and Will shared a panicked glance. "Wait!"

They tried cajoling Steve into letting them ride with him, but it was Eleven who truly rescued them by flatly informing Steve that if they didn't hurry up, their lunch period would be over and he'd make them late. Everyone knew that Eleven hated being late.

So he caved and grumbled, "Alright, you little shitheads, get in the car."

He took them to Taco Bell that day, and every Tuesday for the rest of the semester. He also, apparently, brought Lucas, Dustin, and Max to Burger King every Wednesday, but Mike, Will, and Eleven all agreed that Burger King was kind of gross. Not that they ever told Dustin that, because he'd consider it sacrilege and was likely to challenge someone to an honor duel or something like that.

It always went like this: Will would order three soft tacos without tomatoes and a bean burrito. Mike would order a quesadilla and two soft tacos. Eleven would order something new, at least until she discovered that cinnamon twists were her favorite things in the world. Then she'd always order those with whatever she was trying that day.

They would stop getting weird looks from the staff after three weeks, but never from the other customers. Their whole group looked weird: a jock, a freaky nerd, a crazy nerd, and a punk girl. None of them ever cared, because what did the opinion of a few people, who had no idea what they'd gone through, matter to them when they'd faced literal monsters together?

Mike and Eleven would sit wedged together on one side of the booth, sometimes with their arms linked and sometimes feeding each other cinnamon twists, while Will and Steve were forced to share the other side. Will would crack jokes at Mike and Eleven about how gooey and sappy their romance was, but he'd never, ever say it was gross. Mike would crack jokes about Will's lack of a love life, and Steve's abundance of a love life.

Steve would just smile dopily when Jonathan and Nancy were brought up, and if Will and Mike were being particularly obnoxious, he'd threaten to tell them details about his love life with their siblings. Will and Mike, at that threat, would gag and back off.

Then, once they were done eating, Steve would pack them back up into his car and bring them back to school. Mike and Will would say, "Bye mom!" and Eleven would just wave.

Then Steve would shout after them, "Don't fight any monsters without calling an adult, shitheads! Be safe!" And that would be the end of that weekly exchange.

But as normal as they tried to pretend their lives were again, neither Will nor Mike could shake the feeling that something was going to happen.

Two weeks after classes had begun, Will and Mike were stuck waiting for the rest of their friends to get to AV Club after all of their classes had ended, because their last teacher always let them out early.

"You know," Will said, quietly, like he was before he got possessed, "I feel like we should be preparing."

"Preparing? Why?" Mike asked, knowing exactly what his friend meant. "We don't- shouldn't- have anything to prepare for. El closed the gate."

"Yeah, I know, I know, but I feel like..." he trailed off, not knowing how to describe the feeling he was having. It felt like pressure, that smell right before you heard thunder in the distance. Like he was a mouse being stalked by a cat. Or a shadow demon formed of pure evil. "You know?"

Mike did. "Yeah, I know."

Will continued. "So we should be preparing. I mean, weird things have happened like, twice in two years. Considering the level of weird in both of those instances, it's got to be a pattern, right?"

"I dunno, man, maybe?" Mike shrugged. "But like. What if you're wrong, and we get all prepared for nothing? We'd have been anxious over something happening for no reason, right?"

Will gave his friend a lopsided grin. "Well, you know what Mr. Clarke says."

Mike groaned and said in a deep voice meant to mimic Mr. Clarke, "Better safe than sorry!"

"Right. So..." Will waved his hand expectantly.

Mike sighed. "So, you're right. Let's wait for the rest of the party to get here, and then we'll start planning."

Eleven and Dustin showed up first, having escaped from history class before the teacher could trap them like he'd trapped Max in a mini lecture on Valkyries of all things. Then Lucas appeared with Max in tow, crowing about how he'd rescued her from Mr. Benson.

"He did not!" Max protested, "I was doing just fine getting out of there on my own!"

Mike knew he had to interrupt their argument before it got to be too much. "Will and I think we should prepare for in case something else weird happens in Hawkins."

That shut them up for about three seconds, and then started an even louder argument:

"No, no, no, we're done with it!" Lucas said, and pointed at Eleven, "She closed the gate! We don't have to worry about any more bullshit because no more bullshit can come through!"

"Oh for...!" Max huffed. "Lucas is right! If the gate is closed, nothing can come through!"

"We know it's not likely," Mike said over both of them, "But weird shit has gone down twice in as many years! Like, really weird shit! And I know you all feel like something else is about to happen, because everyone who knows what happened feels the same way!"

"I was literally just about to say the same thing, actually," Dustin

admitted to Lucas' loud gasp of betrayal, "Cause I think something weird is already happening."

They all turned to him slowly.

"Explain," Eleven ordered.

4. Dustin

Notes for the Chapter:

Dustin's playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX4644wrdqMVI>

Dustin shrank away from his friends' gazes. He didn't mind attention, usually, but between Eleven's intensity, Will's exhaustion, Mike's irritation, Max's skepticism, and Lucas' fury, he wasn't really digging being the center of attention at that moment. In fact, he'd prefer to be just about anywhere else. But here he was, and there his friends were, glaring at him. Where the hell was Steve when you needed him?

"I, uh, I've been noticing something weird, is all?" he said. He winced both at the mix of Looks intensifying and at how weak his voice sounded.

Get it together, Dustin, he ordered himself.

Dustin watched as Will closed his eyes and mouthed a prayer. He was pretty sure his friend was mouthing, "please don't let it be deadly, please," but Dustin never was any good at lip reading.

"Okay," Mike said slowly, and if Dustin didn't know him better, he'd have been offended at the kind of condescending tone. "What did you notice?"

Dustin took a deep breath and did the thing that Steve taught him to do when the paranoia was getting to be too much, which was count in to four, then count out to four. Steve had told him that it was a trick he'd figured out just after he helped kill the demogorgon two years ago. He'd taught him a few other tricks, and the only one that Dustin didn't use often was the hair thing. It was just too much effort, and his friends picked at it until it was ruined. It was better to just not, really.

"Everything is rusting," Dustin said, and immediately regretted it because he could feel Mike's and Lucas' exasperated sighs before they even emerged. "No, wait, I'm not explaining right! Hold on!"

He knew some if not all of his friends were rolling their eyes while he rummaged in his backpack, and Jesus he needed to clean that sucker out because he was pretty sure he'd found a six month old candy bar (Was that even safe to eat anymore? He'd find out later.) but stopped when he set the polaroid camera he'd borrowed from his mom and several polaroids on the table.

"Okay, look, this is Mike's dad's car two weeks ago," he said, pushing out the first image.

The photo was of a close up of the car, near the rear right wheel. The paint was the ugly beige or champagne or whatever color they all recognized from Mike's dad's car, but what drew their attention was the quarter sized rust spot in the dead center of the photo.

Mike let out a whistle and said, "Shit, I bet dad was pissed."

Dustin snorted. "Yeah, he was not happy when I pointed it out to him. I think he actually said 'fuck'? I literally cannot ever remember your dad cursing before that moment. Anyway, this next one is from last week. Saturday, of course, right before D&D night. I didn't bring it up because I wanted to make sure, but..."

He put the next photo on top of the previous one. This time, the photo was taken from farther back, and the rust spot was nearly four inches wide.

Mike winced, no doubt imagining his dad's reaction. "Okay, so dad's car is rusting. Cars do that."

Dustin shook his head. "No, listen, that's what I wanted to make sure of. I asked my neighbor, Mr. Johnson, because he's a mechanic, I asked him if this was possible, and how fast rust could spread. He said that rust spreads quick, but when I showed him these pictures, he was like, super confused and said that it couldn't have spread that fast in just a week. He said it looked more like six months' worth of rust and told me not to lie to him. Obviously, I wasn't but, y'know."

"Alright," Max said, startling all of them, "I believe it."

Lucas turned to her. "You believe this nonsense?"

She shrugged. "I lived in California. Water and salt make things rust really fast. Like, really, really fast. You wouldn't believe how often I had to change out the trucks on my board, but even I've never seen anything rust that fast. It's not natural. It's gotta be something else."

"Mike, do we have a comparison in the monster manual?" Will asked, his voice falling flat and tired.

Dustin felt really bad for being the bearer of bad news, but the last couple of times shit went down, they all figured it was nothing or not too serious until it was way too late, and he wasn't about to fall down that trap again. Especially not after he'd been the cause of something getting out of hand because he'd ignored what he should have known but didn't want to admit.

He wondered if it was bad that he still kinda missed D'art, even though the demodog had eaten his cat and nearly eaten his friends. D'art had been a really cute baby, and he'd turned out kind of okay in the end. Really, he'd just misjudged how much he needed to eat, right?

Shit, he needed to stop thinking about it or he'd actually find a way to justify that horrible, horrible mistake of his. Will had puked up a demodog slug baby, Dustin raised it like an idiot because it was kind of vaguely cute, and then it and its brethren tried to eat them.

Mike muttered to himself for a moment before saying, "Rust monster. It's the only thing it could be."

"You're joking," Max said. "Not only is there a D&D monster that's called a 'rust monster' but we have to deal with a demon creature that does the same thing in real life. Not to mention the shitty name."

Mike shrugged. "I didn't name the monsters. Anyway, in D&D, it's mostly like, harmless? It doesn't do a lot of damage to people, and it doesn't attack unprovoked, cause it's got a neutral alignment. It does have a shit-ton of hit points, though. It rolls five hit die!"

"Okay, so what's the catch?" Max asked. "There's always a catch when it sounds that simple and easy."

Something caught Dustin's eye and while he didn't tune out the conversation, he could now say he'd been thoroughly distracted.

"Guys!" Dustin said.

Nobody seemed to hear him. He couldn't make himself tear his eyes away from what he was looking at, because he honestly couldn't believe the fucking timing of what he was witnessing.

"Well," Mike said, scratching his head, "Like the name implies, it's a rust monster. It rusts anything and everything it touches. Magical items also have a chance to lose their bonuses very time they hit it, and once all the bonuses are gone, it starts rusting as well. I was planning on breaking one out whenever your characters started getting too high of levels and accumulated too much shit."

Will muttered something like, "just our luck."

Lucas scoffed at Mike, betrayed. "Wow, fuck you too, dude!"

Dustin had to agree, but now really wasn't the time.

"Listen, I didn't want you all to go power crazy, okay? It's a basic DM strategy!" Mike said as if that defended his actions.

"No, dude, that's evil! I worked hard for that Sword of Kobold Killing!"

"I still think that's a stupid name, and anyway you have like three swords! Why do you need five swords!? Not to mention that of course I'd give you new weapons right after that! I'm practical, not cruel!"

"Guys," Dustin said again. Really, why were they like this?

Max, the asshole, threw herself into the argument. "Actually, Lucas, I was wondering that myself. Compensating much?"

"Max, you traitor!"

If it weren't for what Dustin was seeing, he'd let the argument play out. That had been a damn good burn from Max. But he really needed them to pay attention to him right that second.

Mike pointed to Max with a triumphant grin. "Ha! See, even your girlfriend agrees with me!"

Max turned on him at that. "I'm not his girlfriend!"

Dustin slammed his hands on the table, finally shutting his friends up. "Guys!"

When they turned to look at him, he pointed at the desks.

They followed his gaze, and saw what he saw: rust creeping along the metal bars of the desk, right before their eyes. The rust was webbing out like frost on glass, and would have been pretty if not for the fact that what they were witnessing meant that they had to defeat another beast that shouldn't exist in real life.

"Shit," Eleven said. "That's bad."

Dustin couldn't agree more.

"Okay," Will said in a fake bright tone, "So how do we kill a rust monster?"

5. Lucas & Max

Summary for the Chapter:

Lucas: <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DXcwHdYd3Pwgy>

Max: <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWTYQaQY8uMZ3>

Max didn't like to talk about her brother. No, not even after he'd kicked Steve's ass and she'd stabbed him with knock-out juice. She just didn't, okay?

Lucas didn't really like to talk about it either. He knew her brother no doubt hated him because he was black, because of course he would, but at the same time, he really didn't want the verbal confirmation.

"I have some lighter fluid at my house," Max said. "In case we need to, you know, light anything on fire."

"It's a last resort but only because it's noticeable, and I'd like to *not* get my sister involved if possible," Mike said, "because she's been studying for some crazy hard test and it will get real ugly if we have to interrupt her."

"Yeah, Jonathan's got that same class and he's been hiding from her this past week because she's gone even crazier than usual," Will added. "We can probably ask him for help, though, cause he's avoiding Nancy."

“Hopper’s busy,” Eleven said.

“And Mom,” Will added, with a scrunch of his nose that told Lucas all he ever needed to know.

“I’ll get Steve on board,” Dustin said.

They split up to cover more ground. Mike’s suggestion, of course, because as much as the rest of them hated to admit it, he was the tactician among them. Lucas knew it was from so many years of being their DM and knowing how each of them would react to just about anything, but it was still frustrating as hell to let someone else take charge of such a potentially deadly situation.

Mike and Will went to recruit Jonathan and his car. Eleven and Dustin went to recruit Steve and his bat. And Lucas was stuck going over to Max’s house to go get her lighter fluid.

If Lucas didn’t trust Mike, he’d bitch a lot more, but well. He does trust Mike. He still might kick his ass because of this, though.

“Are you sure it’s safe for me to come in?” Lucas whispered.

“Quit being a wuss,” Max said. “Billy won’t say shit, and Niel’s out for the night.”

“Okay, but what about your mom?” Lucas hissed.

“What about her?”

“Is she gonna be, you know...?”

Max stopped, and he nearly ran into her. “Dude. What’s your problem? You’re more scared of my family than a literal monster. I’ve only been through this monster bullshit once, but I would have thought that you, having been through this monster bullshit twice, would be a little braver.”

She was right, he was being a coward. “I just...”

She shook her head at him expectantly.

He sighed. “Okay, but I’m not scared. I just don’t want to find out that another family in Hawkins is super racist, all right?”

Max laughed. That was what he was worried about? She figured it was a reasonable worry, but her family was from California, which she was pretty sure was the most progressive state in the country. She’d been told that, at least.

“It’s not funny!”

“No, no,” she said, still laughing, “no, that’s not- Dude, I’m from

California! At my old school, there were more, I dunno the right phrase, not white kids than white kids. My mom's not super racist, okay? I don't know about my stepdad, but she's not. The worst she'll do is say something dumb because she doesn't know better, I promise. She's super chill."

Lucas paused a second longer, but gave in and said, "if you're sure."

"I am," she insisted, and opened her front door.

Lucas had to take her word for it, and followed her into the house.

The trip was far more uneventful than he'd expected. Max's mom greeted them as they came into the house with, "Hello, Maxine, hello Maxine's friend. Please leave your door open!"

Max responded with, "We're just stopping to pick things up! We're gonna hang out with the rest of the party for tonight! Might spend the night at Mike's house!"

"Okay, as long as that darling Jane girl and Mike's sister is there," her mother said.

While they were shoving the two bottles of lighter fluid and other bric-a-bracs into their backpacks, Lucas leaned over and said, "Your mom really is weirdly chill."

Max shrugged casually, but Lucas caught the uncomfortable twist of her mouth. "I told you so."

Lucas didn't say that he thought it might have more to do with getting her out of the house when Billy or her stepdad was there. Lucas also didn't say that he wondered if her mom regretted marrying her stepdad.

They left as quickly as they came in, and then they were off to the junkyard, where Mike was absolutely certain the rust monster was living. Max was on her skateboard, crouched low to the pavement, and clinging to the back of his bike with one hand while Lucas pedaled. He thanked everything that he'd insisted upon getting a bike with more gears than necessary, or this would have been way harder.

They meet up with Mike, Will, and Jonathan at the end of the dirt road that lead to the Byers' house. Lucas shoved his bike into Jonathan's trunk and Max tossed her board in after it.

"Inventory," Mike said, "We managed to get a bunch of wooden stakes and some good-sized rocks for your wrist rocket, Lucas. Jonathan's also got like, three lighters and a box of matches."

"Two bottles of lighter fluid, some jacks I figure we could use as caltrops, maybe, and my old softball bat," Max rattled off.

"Got my wrist rocket," Lucas added.

Somehow, the boys started arguing, and Max took the moment to watch Lucas. He was such a dork, launching out reference after reference almost quicker than his friends could recognize them. She honestly couldn't believe she liked him. Mike is more her type: angry, happy to argue until he's blue in the face, and loyal as hell. But even before she'd known about Eleven, she'd only really been interested in Lucas, and maybe Dustin.

She was really never getting over the awkward way Lucas and Dustin had asked her to go trick-or-treating with them, and she was definitely never letting Dustin live down "presumptuous." Never, ever.

Jonathan parked the car a good walk away from the junk yard. When Max asked why, he said, "it's a rust monster, and I can't afford for it to eat my car."

Max nodded and didn't ask to get her board out of the trunk like she'd been thinking about asking, because it was really fucking difficult to find skateboard parts in Hawkins.

Eleven, Dustin, and Steve were already at the gate to the junkyard when the rest of them got there. Eleven looked grim, as usual, but Steven and Dustin were arguing. Mike and Jonathan walked past them to scout ahead and Max could only envy their ability to ignore Dustin and Steve's shouting.

"Be safe, jackasses, and don't bait it!" Steve shouted after them and then turned to Dustin, waving wildly, "That thing looks nothing like what you said it would!"

“We fucking told you we didn’t know what it actually looked like!” Dustin shouted back. “It was an approximation! A guess! I didn’t think it’d be that big either, dude!”

“That big? That big!? That thing is a *lot* fucking bigger than five feet long!”

“What part of approximation don’t you understand!” Dustin waved wildly in the other direction, “The Demogorgon was only like, eight feet tall! It’s eighteen feet tall in D&D!”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better!?”

Max interrupted because this was something she really had to know. “Wait, the first monster you fought was barely taller than a pro basketball player? What the hell?”

Both of them turned to her, pointing angrily. “You didn’t see it!”

Her hands flew into the air before she even processed what they said. They were right, she hadn’t seen it. She hadn’t meant to be dismissive, but in hindsight, she had been. One of these days she’d figure out how to make her voice sound right when she was saying things so that this would stop happening.

“No, I meant,” she said, “that it was that big? The demodogs weren’t big, but there was a ton of them, and most of them didn’t see the, uh, mind flayer.”

Will hesitated in what he was doing- wrapping sticks in rags so they could soak them in fire- but continued as if it had never been mentioned.

“Oh,” Steve said, “Sorry for yelling, kid.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said, “sorry. It’s just, you know, it like, kidnapped El and nearly killed Nancy and Jonathan, so we’re all a little touchy about it.”

“Clearly,” she said.

And that’s right about when everything went to hell. Max lost track of anyone other than Lucas, and it was only when she was standing over a crispy, foul-smelling Upside Down monster corpse that she was able to figure out what all even happened.

6. interlude: Steve

Notes for the Chapter:

playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX3qBSXlrr5zW>

Steve knew he was paranoid, okay? He doesn't think anyone can blame him because Jesus Christ, have you seen what he has to deal with? No? Then you should shut up.

He likes using his lunch breaks on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to bring his kids out to eat. Yeah, he doesn't really know when he started thinking of them as his kids, but they're his. He works as Hopper's personal assistant for now, which mostly involves bringing him coffee and making sure he eats and checking in on Eleven when he's on-duty. Steve can't do much more because he's not a cop and he doesn't really want to be.

So he takes the kids out to lunch when he can, makes sure they're all doing okay, gives advice here and there. Will tells him about Eleven using the "you got a problem?" line on some jackass and honestly Steve couldn't be any prouder of the girl. She's a little badass already, she just needs some refining to be the best little badass she could be.

And Dustin was turning out to be quite the ladies' man. Steve made sure that the little shit knew better than to pull some of the bullshit he did, but really, Dustin was a natural.

Now Lucas, that boy didn't need anything from him other than rides to school and to loom over his shoulder once in a while in the face of racist bigots. Steve's always happy to do that, because he knows he probably was a racist asshole in the past even if he doesn't remember

it. Better to make up for mistakes he never made than to never make up for the ones he did.

And Will! Oh, jeez, he likes that kid. He's not nerdy enough to keep up with the shithead, but he's quick and sassy just like his brother. He's also the most likely to quietly tell Steve when he fucks up instead of just yelling or teasing. He's happy to fix his bullshit whenever, but it's easier when he's not embarrassed, if he's honest.

Mike's a little badass, too. He takes no shit, even when there's no way he could win a fight. Steve supposes that if his girlfriend had crazy magic mind powers, he wouldn't be very scared of anything but upsetting her, either.

Right now, he's lying on the ground, winded from being knocked back oh, about twelve feet, and watching one of his kids standing over what's left of the corpse of the latest otherworldly monster. That's a phrase that'll amuse him later: "the latest otherworldly monster." Because this is a regular thing in their lives now, and he hates it, thanks.

Max, the little demon herself, had been charged by the fucking monster, bowled over, and she still got up, grabbed one of Will's torches, lit it with Jonathan's zippo, sprayed the monster with an entire bottle of lighter fluid, and then threw the torch at it. Steve was sincerely impressed with the kid, not only because she killed it so thoroughly, but because she made it seem so easy. She was like, bam, bam, bam, bam, and it's dead.

Luckily nobody was terribly injured aside from some mild to moderate bruising and scrapes. He and Max had it the worst, because the monster had smacked both of them dead on, while everyone else

was injured because they'd been running around and they got caught on junk.

Jonathan drove half of the kids in his car, and Steve drove the other half as they descended upon the Byers house once more.

Jonathan's mom was home and began fussing over them, of course. Steve liked Mrs. Byers and not just because she told them they were probably all caught up on their tetanus shots and probably didn't have to go to the hospital. She'd given him and Max bags of frozen peas to put on their worst bruises and left them alone for the night.

While she was fussing over the rest of them, Steve turned his head to Max with as small of a wince as he could manage.

"Hey, kid," he said, "Nice job out there."

"Thanks," she said, sounding a bit too dazed for his liking. But Mrs. Byers said she didn't have a concussion, so he had to believe her.

"No, really," he said, "that was badass. Remember when you stabbed your step-brother with the tranquilizer? This was even more badass than that."

"I didn't even think," she said, and it took him a minute to realize that she didn't have anything else to say after that.

He shrugged. "Well, that means you've got good instincts, then,

huh?”

She hummed. “I guess.”

He would have nudged her shoulder with his if they hadn’t both been so bruised and sore. “Hey, kid, none of that. What’s up?”

“I just...” She hesitated. “I’m still scared of Billy and my stepdad. I killed a monster, but they’re scarier still somehow and I feel really stupid.”

Steve was already shaking his head as she finished. “Nah, kid, you’re not stupid. A monster you can just kill, right? Then you don’t have to deal with it anymore. Billy and your stepdad are still around and you can’t just kill them. I mean, you could, but I don’t think Hopper would bail you out if you committed murder, no matter how justified, you know?”

“I know,” she said, “I just...”

“...Want to stop being scared,” Steve finished for her. “I feel you kid. Why not ask Eleven to terrify them into being at least kind of decent people? That sounds like it would work.”

“Ask dad.”

Both Steve and Max jumped and looked over to Eleven, who was

perched on the chair next to the couch like she hadn't scared them by sneaking up on them and eavesdropping.

"Jesus, kid, wear a bell or something," Steve grumbled.

"What do you mean 'ask dad'?" Max asked.

"Hopper," Eleven said. "Ask him to scare Billy and your stepdad."

"Oh," Max said. "But that might make things worse."

Eleven smiled. "Then you ask me."

Steve watched Max think about it before shrugging. "I guess it can't make anything worse than it already is, right? I could always run away and live in your cabin if it gets too bad, I guess."

"Yes."

Steve hoped it would all work out, but put on his best confident face and told Max that there was no way it could fail, and if it did, he'd adopt her like, for real.

The beaming smile she gave him was absolutely worth the heart palpitation he gave himself by uttering those words out loud.

7. Mike

Mike hated hormones. Nancy had complained so often about teenage boys, but he'd thought she'd been kidding. It couldn't have been as bad as she was saying because there was no logical way that boys could be that awful, right? All of his friends were just fine and they were boys.

No, Mike realized over the course of the first month of Sophomore year, boys were even worse than she said.

Lucas was head over heels for Max, which, if pressed, Mike would say it was just fine, but Dustin? Dustin was going absolutely crazy over girls. Mike knew it had to be Steve's fault, but there was no way he would ever say that to Dustin because Dustin would go apeshit.

But his friends weren't even that bad. What was bad was the way every single boy in their grade hounded Eleven like the Demogorgon went after blood. It was horrible and Mike simultaneously wanted to fist fight each and every boy that wolf whistled or catcalled her and watch Eleven destroy them with her powers. The latter would be more satisfying, but Eleven had decided that she's never, ever going to hurt a person if they don't really deserve it.

"El, they're harassing you," Mike had told her, "They're hurting you! You can totally hurt them back."

"No," Eleven had said, meaning both that they aren't hurting her, which Mike reluctantly believed, and that she wasn't going to hurt them.

That is, until Eleven found Mary Greene crying in the bathroom.

"Who is Jacobi Kensey?" Eleven asked the Party

Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas all looked up at her in alarm. Jacobi Kensey was the worst bully of their grade, and there had been a rumor a few years ago that he'd cut the throat of Amy Jenson's dog. Amy had been in hysterics for weeks, and Jacobi had laughed and laughed. She'd ended up suspended for a week for attacking him, but it hadn't made him stop being a raging jerk.

"Evil," Will said, which explained a lot with just one word, coming from him, since he'd literally been possessed by the Upside Down monster that personified evil.

"Really evil," Mike agreed, and told her about Amy Jenson's dog. "Why, what did he do? Did he hurt you?"

"Not me," Eleven said. "Mary has bruises on her thighs. Like fingers. Teeth. She's scared."

Mike bristled, and could feel the rest of his friends reacting similarly. It was one thing for Jacobi to bully nerds and another thing to assault a girl. Mike didn't know what they could do, but he was sure they'd figure something out. If they can beat the Upside Down, they can beat a high school rapist, right?

Eleven continued, sounding both angry and bewildered, "He hurt her, but she won't do anything. Why won't she do anything if he hurt her?"

It had fallen to Mike to explain what had happened to Mary, because he was Eleven's boyfriend and the others thought he'd be able to explain it better because he was the writer among them, wasn't he? Cowards. But he'd explained in as delicate of terms that he could while also being the level of blunt that Eleven still needed.

Eleven's expression had turned about as thunderous as it had been when she'd arrived at Will's house that day Mike discovered she was alive. Mike was completely unsurprised that she was as angry about a boy assaulting a girl as she was about the rip between the real world and the Upside down existing.

"If we tell, will she be okay?" she asked with a tone that said she knew the answer.

"Jacobi will probably get away with it," Mike answered anyway. "It's awful, but adults don't take that stuff seriously, like, ever."

"Hopper," Eleven countered.

"He can try, but like, judges don't care about those kind of cases that much, not around here," Mike replied. "I'm sorry, El, but there's nothing the adults can do."

Eleven fell silent for a long moment and Mike could see her thinking. He knew which conclusion she was going to come to, because of course she would. He didn't know the details still, and would never ask, but he knew she'd gone through some serious shit before she'd escaped the lab. There was no way she'd ever, ever tolerate someone else infringing on a person's free will like that.

"We have to," Eleven said.

"Mike just said it won't do anything, Eleven," Dustin said gently.

"No," Eleven said. "He hurt her. We have to. Us."

"Oh," Dustin said.

"Oh shit," Lucas said.

"Oh, hell yeah," Max said. "Let's do this shit."

Mike said, "It's Thursday. He goes to the arcade on Thursdays and plays PacMan until about seven."

Dustin and Lucas turned to him in surprise. Dustin said, "You're just going to let them go out and kill someone? Jesus, Mike, I thought you were the lawful good one, here! Shouldn't we at least try to go through Hopper?"

Mike shrugged. "You know Hopper wouldn't be able to do much. He'd get away with it, so this is a faster and more efficient solution, right? El goes and scares the life out of him, he never touches another girl again and warns all of his asshole friends not to do what he did or the crazy punk girl will kick their asses. It's a long reaching solution that bypasses basically all complications."

"Shit, dude, he's right," Lucas said. "I can't believe we're using Eleven's Jean Grey powers for something like this. Isn't she supposed to keep laying low? Minimal power usage?"

"I don't care," Eleven said. "He hurt her. If the adults won't do anything, we have to."

When Eleven, who was otherwise the most mild-mannered and gentle person among them, said that someone deserved to be hurt, the rest of them couldn't argue, because there was no doubt that she was right. So they followed after her, squished into Steve's backseat while she rode shotgun, and held witness while she did her thing.

Mike couldn't take his eyes off of her as she hauled Jacobi Kensey out of the arcade by the scruff of his jacket, which Mike knew that she actually physically wasn't capable of, so she had to be using her powers subtly, which was always impressive.

She hauled him back behind the dumpsters and slammed him against the foul-smelling blue metal and shook him a little.

“What the fuck, bitch!?” Jacobi shouted, “What the hell are you?”

Max sidled up to stand next to Eleven with a wide grin. “Oh, buddy, you shouldn’t piss off the crazy girl. Haven’t you heard the rumors?”

The rumors, of course, being that she’s got psychic powers and that she ran with a gang and that she’s killed someone.

“They’re true,” Mike added from behind her.

Eleven took a step back from Jacobi but left him pressed against the dumpster. His feet didn’t touch the ground.

"I’m the bitch,” Eleven said softly, “who will literally murder you if you ever touch another girl the way you touched Mary Greene. Don’t think I’m not capable of it. I will know if you do, and you will not see me coming and nobody will know who murdered you. Am I understood?"

Jacobi Kensey nodded frantically, and she set him back on the ground too-gently. He bolted, and Mike tugged softly on her giant jacket until she turned to him.

"Can I kiss you?" Mike asked her.

She answered by kissing him, which was even better of an answer than Mike could have asked for.

“Mike, really?” Dustin said behind him. “We’re behind a dumpster. I get that your girlfriend was being super hot like, Phoenix style, just now, but really, man? You have a terrible taste in location.”

Mike responded by giving him the finger.

“El, will you go to Homecoming with me?” he asked when they parted.

She frowned at him. “Yes. Went last year, together. Of course this year, too.”

“I figured,” Mike said, “but I like asking.”

Dustin and Lucas mimicked gagging in the background, and Will betrayed Mike by joining in, but Mike couldn’t bring himself to honestly care. He was going to be sappy with Eleven for as long as she wanted him to be sappy with her.

8. Lucas & Dustin

Dustin and Lucas were close friends in the way that Mike and Will were close friends. They had their larger friend group, of course, which was even larger now with Max and Eleven in the mix, but even when it had just been the four boys, they'd hung out more together than with Mike and Will.

Neither of them minded. Mike was a little too high strung for Dustin to handle some days, and Will was too quiet and brooding, even before the whole Upside Down nonsense, for Lucas. Luckily, Dustin and Lucas had clicked together the second they'd met in third grade. Besides, Will and Mike had been best friends long before they'd met Dustin and Lucas, so it only made sense that they'd be closer to each other than to Dustin or Lucas.

So when Lucas started dating Max and stopped hanging out with Dustin as much, Dustin had been reasonably jealous and lonely. His best friend in the whole world had abandoned him for love. What had happened to bros before-?

"Don't even say it, Dustin," Lucas said, pointing a threatening finger at him. "You know she'd kick your ass if she ever heard you say that word, and I know you don't actually believe that bullshit, so don't even."

"Shit, yeah, alright," Dustin said. "Sorry, dude."

"Just hang out with Steve when I'm with Max. Maybe then he'll teach you how to be able to get a girlfriend, huh?"

"Oh, fuck you, Sinclair!"

But Dustin had followed Lucas' advice and now, if he wasn't with the whole Party or with Lucas, he was tagging along after Steve. He would have felt weird and annoying about it if Steve weren't such a fucking mom about it.

"Have you even eaten a single vegetable in the past month?" Steve grumbled from the stove in his apartment, where he was frying up green beans the way the local Chinese place did. "You need veggies, man, I don't care how gross you think they are."

Dustin stuck his tongue out. "But they're really gross!"

Steve pointed at him with a spatula. "Do you want to be in fighting shape when the next alien monster bullshit hits Hawkins or do you want to get eaten by something? Huh?"

"...fighting shape."

Steve nodded triumphantly. "That's what I thought. So eat your fuckin' veggies, little man. I'm sure we can find something that doesn't offend your delicate sensibilities, hm?"

So Dustin started eating his damn vegetables. He didn't enjoy most of them, because his mom was bad at cooking them, but Steve made

some mean green beans and Jonathan's cheesy broccoli was to die for, so it wasn't all bad.

Lucas, meanwhile, had two standing weekly dates with Max. On Tuesdays, he'd watch her kick ass at Dig Dug and then buy the two of them ice cream from the diner down the street with his allowance. On Thursdays, she'd teach him how to skateboard on the school parking lot and bring snacks and candy for after he'd inevitably scrape up his elbow or knee or conk his head on something.

Every time he got hurt and complained, she'd say something along the lines of, "It's toughening you up for the next weird shit to hit town."

He couldn't argue, because after just a few weeks of skateboarding, he was the toughest of his friends. Other than Eleven, of course, but she had psychic powers so did that really count?

But really, he hadn't noticed how much stronger he was until a bully had gone to grab his jacket and he'd not only caught the asshole's hand but shoved it away hard enough to knock him over. Lucas had looked at his hand in astonishment and then to Max, who grinned proudly.

"Holy shit," he said, amazed. "I pulled a Sarah Conner. I'm a badass now!"

"I told you, you're getting tougher," Max said with a smug grin.

But in the end, even though Dustin had a new mentor in the shape of Steve Harrington, and Lucas was dating his badass Californian girlfriend, Dustin and Lucas hung out together more often than not.

Some of the time, they watched movies and played Atari together, but most of this time was spent training. They didn't tell Mike or Will or Eleven about it, because they'd figured that those three were working on their own training. They did tell Steve in case something went wrong and he had to drive them to the hospital or something.

"No, no, Dustin, man, you gotta- like this!"

"Lucas, I don't think that's going to work!"

They had decided during movie night at Lucas' house that they didn't want to be caught unawares ever again, and they didn't want to have to scramble to fight something, and they definitely did not want to accidentally hurt someone while they were trying to fight.

Their training mostly consisted of mimicking Rocky montages or trying to recreate and perfect cooperative moves they'd done in D&D campaigns or seen in movies.

Some things were major successes, like that time they'd tried to do something like Captain America and Hawkeye would do. Lucas had jumped on a "shield" made of a chunk of metal and Dustin had shoved him into the air. Somehow, Lucas had consistently managed to hit the target they'd set up. They'd ended up blowing most of their allowance on candy and soda to celebrate.

Some things were spectacular failures. They'd vowed to never speak of the Terminator Incident after it had resulted in a panicked phone call to Steve and a minor hospital visit.

Dustin preferred practicing things where they had multiple enemies, with the logic that it would almost certainly be Eleven fighting the big fuckers with her mind powers. Lucas liked practicing for a lone, medium target, because he had definitely not liked the Demogorgon one fucking bit, no sir. They'd ended up taking turns deciding what to practice for, and somehow it had worked out perfectly and they were as well rounded as they could be while only pretending to fight things.

The first time they'd gotten to use this newfound coordination was when they were out in the woods by Lucas' house, practicing like usual, and they'd accidentally pissed off a cougar.

"Fuck!" Dustin shouted and ran for Lucas. "Cougar!"

Lucas ran to meet him, holding the bowie knife he'd gotten for Christmas last year. "Swing me!"

Dustin, still running, grabbed Lucas around the waist and swung him to the left, out of the cougar's path, which also threw Dustin to the right and out of its path.

The cougar skidded to a stop just short of a tree, and had very little time to do anything, because Dustin was running at it and screaming,

and Lucas was running at it and screaming and swiping at it with his knife. All three were surprised when the knife hit fur and blood shot out of the cougar's shoulder.

It yowled and turned tail, a trail of blood following after it.

Dustin let himself fall to the ground and pant as long as he needed. Lucas kept standing, and stared at his knife for a long while.

"Holy shit," he finally said. "Our training works."

"Thank fucking god," Dustin said. "Or we'd be cat chow right now. I like not being cat chow. It feels good, you know? Not being cat chow. Holy shit, we almost fucking died."

Lucas laughed. "We should clean up at the river and then go back to my house and eat a whole carton of ice cream because Jesus Christ do we deserve it."

"Damn. Fucking. Right."

The next day at school, they hadn't been able to contain themselves and gathered their friends around to tell the story of how badass they'd been the night before.

"You've been training?" Mike asked midway through the story, "Since when? Jesus fuck, we should have been training too! Will,

Eleven, let's meet at the cabin tonight to get started."

"You haven't been training? Like at all?" Dustin asked. "Jesus, you're behind the times, dude. Anyway, then Lucas came running in like, like a fuckin' badass with his knife and..."

Steve, sitting with them before school started, leaned over and ruffled Dustin's hair. "See, I told you that veggies were good for you, shithead."

Dustin and Lucas kept training, even when November was over without incidents. Not only was their training fun, but they figured it was better safe than sorry.

9. Will

When his mom flipped the calendar over to November, Will crossed his fingers and begged any deity that was listening to please, please, please, just let there not be any nonsense this year, please. Things came in threes, right? That's what his grandma used to always say before she died. Things came in threes. Three years of three monsters from- from There was enough, right? Right?

"Maybe it'll be okay, Will," his mom said in the same tone she used to say 'your dad's coming home tonight, boys.'

Will didn't get his hopes up too high. What Mike had said last year had been right: this was too big for it not to be a pattern. Frankly, he was just glad they'd gotten rid of the Mind Flayer and that they didn't have to deal with that thing ever again. That he didn't have to deal with it ever again. Probably. Right?

Still, he did hope.

He carried lighter fluid in his backpack and always had a zippo and a large pocketknife in his pockets and spent every weekend in the woods with Mike and Eleven training the best they could for anything they could think of.

But he went to class and paid attention and got good grades and tried to get to know girls other than Eleven and Max and tried, well, to be normal. Or as normal as he could be, as a paranoid nerd.

He knew his friends understood. He had the highest grades of his year, which of course invited bullies. But, somehow, whenever he was approached by himself, Eleven or Max or Mike would be there, looming protectively. Will was certain that Eleven was using her mind powers to contact the others just to tell them he was being picked on. He should know, he helped her make that a possibility.

Will really couldn't complain, though, because somehow the all managed to not be overbearing about it. Well, not Dustin, but Dustin was just overbearing in general and Will was far beyond used to that by now.

Dustin was with him whenever he tried to talk to girls, though Will never had as much success as his friend did. He didn't mind too much. Jonathan had told him that all that matters is that he try, and eventually, he'd find the right person for him. Or persons, Will had silently added when Jonathan had needed to leave immediately after that conversation for his monthly date night with Nancy and Steve.

Trying to be normal was harder, because neither he nor most of his friends knew how. Mike's family was the closest to normal, but they were also incredibly dysfunctional, so Will was pretty certain that they weren't good role models.

November crawled by. Each day, Will dreaded going outside because he knew, he *knew* something was going to happen, and he wanted nothing to do with it, please and thank you. His friends noticed his reluctance but said nothing. He knew they had the same feeling he did.

Mike was just as determined as he was to not be caught unawares after Lucas and Dustin had revealed that they'd been training

together. Max had pitched a fit about being left out, but in the end Dustin had agreed that she could train with them and that had stopped her complaining.

So Will threw himself into his training with Mike and Eleven because he was not going to be possessed again if he could help it. He helped Eleven hone the more delicate sides of her mind powers, like talking and finding people. She was better at finding people than she was at talking with just her mind. She was a bit like Professor X, so most of the things he had her try were based on things Prof. X did in the X-Men comics. It was honestly a nice distraction from worrying over what the hell was going to hit Hawkins next.

He and Mike also got very used to being thrown and caught by Eleven. Neither had enjoyed it at first, but once Eleven figured out how to not give them mild whiplash, it had become kind of a game. Mike and Will would throw themselves off of an eight foot tall rock overlooking a deep pond, so if Eleven couldn't catch them, they'd land in the water relatively safely.

Will took to carrying a first aid kit alongside his large pocketknife after Eleven had missed catching them or had exhausted herself one too many times. He was good at patching people up. He'd picked a cleric for his D&D character for a reason, after all.

But the weeks passed, and on December first, 1986, at 12:01, Will Byers let out a great big sigh of relief.

The next morning, as he was walking into the school, his pocket and backpack still as heavy as they have been since November 1985, he saw a dark cloud pass over and smelled the sulfur-copper smell of the Upside Down and he wanted to scream in sheer fucking exhaustion

and frustration. He wanted to badly to be done with the fucking Upside Down and he knew he wasn't but he'd let himself hope anyway.

He did not scream.

Instead, he thought very loudly in Eleven's direction, knowing from their training that she was almost certainly out of range. He tried to shove his alarm and urgency at her the way she'd told him to, and repeated loudly in his head: "CODE RED."

When she didn't respond, he pulled out his radio, extended the antenna, switched to channel 11 and started repeating his message there, "Code Red. I repeat, Code Red."

After two minutes of being ignored, he added, "Is anyone listening? Please respond. We really do have a Code Red, over."

Finally, a crackling voice spoke back, "What the fuck do you mean we have a Code Red, Byers? It's December! Over."

"I mean," he said, "that we have a Code Fucking Red, Lucas. Over."

"Shit," someone else said. "Is it urgent or can it wait? Over."

"I honestly don't know, Dustin. Over."

"Okay, kids," Hopper said, "I'll come pick you up. The story is that your parents signed you up to do a Ride-Along with me and I forgot to ask the school. Get your gear ready. Over."

"Should I call Nancy?" Mike asked. "I can, I'm still at home. Over."

"No, those three are in Oregon or something," Hopper replied, "It won't do anyone any good to have them worrying when they can't do anything. We'll tell them later. Over."

And that seemed to be that. Will went to his homeroom and pretended to pay attention to his teacher until the principal knocked on the door and summoned him for his surprise Ride-Along with Hopper and his friends. It was a brilliantly simple cover, he had to admit, but he was too distracted with what he'd seen to really admire it.

Will took his books out of his backpack and shoved them into Dustin's locker, which was closest and of course they all knew each other's combinations and didn't run even though he really wanted to because the principal was walking him to the parking lot. He needed some of the things in his backpack, like his lighter fluid and first aid kit, but the books would just weigh him down.

Dustin, Mike, Eleven, and Lucas were already outside in the parking lot, and when the principal went back in for Max, he was immediately bombarded with questions from them all.

"Let's just wait for Max," Will said, trying not to sound as tired as he was, over all of them, "That way, I won't have to explain twice."

"That's fine for details, but I need to know right now what it was that you saw, kid," Hopper argued, "so spit it out."

Will grimaced. "You're not going to like it. It's bigger than the rust monster and probably just as mean as the Demogorgon."

"What is it?" Mike demanded. "Quit being cryptic and just tell us!"

Will shook his head and waved towards the school, where the principal was standing with Max. She ran over to join them, asked the same questions the rest of them had, and finally Will told them what he saw.

"A Wyvern."

10. Eleven & Max

Eleven had played enough D&D with her boys that she didn't need to be told what a wyvern was. While Mike explained to her dad, she closed her eyes and searched the way she and Will had discovered had the longest reach.

She thought of the sulfur and the ash and the feeling of something coming, something dangerous. She thought of the Upside Down, and reached out over Hawkins to find the thing that didn't belong here. She found it, and before it noticed her, she pulled away and back into her own body.

When she opened her eyes, she was not standing where she had been. Instead, she was sitting between Max and Mike in her dad's truck. They were moving, she realized when Will passed her a tissue for her nose.

"We're going to Steve's apartment," Max said. "Apparently our Mom's been stashing away supplies for in case something like this happened."

Eleven nodded. Steve had told her when he'd asked her what all would work on Upside Down monsters. She hadn't really known what to say other than "Fire." He'd accepted that, and then asked what kind of foods helped her get back on her feet after she exhausted herself. Which meant that she was going to be able to eat something to replenish her energy soon.

"Health potion," she said once they were inside.

"I'll get it," Max offered. "I know where he stashes them."

Max and Steve had experimented over what combination of things worked best for Eleven, because they both knew what was filling, but Max's tastes ran closer to Eleven's than Steve's did. Also, Max was incapable of cooking anything more complicated than pasta noodles.

The end result wasn't terribly tasty, but it wasn't disgusting and it absolutely did the trick. Steve had said that spinach and cream cheese inside of a hardboiled egg was kind of like a devilled egg, but when he'd made one of those for her, she'd found it absolutely disgusting. So Steve ate the yolk and made her a small batch of "Potions" every week. The last batch had been made just three days ago, before he'd left with his boyfriend and girlfriend for wherever.

Max had liked Eleven once she'd gotten over her jealousy. She was a huge fucking weirdo, but that's what Max liked about her. She was her and didn't let anyone influence her if she didn't want to let them influence her. Somehow, that had cumulated into a very weird but surprisingly good looking wardrobe comprised of plain dresses and overalls, boots, oversized jackets, and band shirts. Max had even supplied some of her old shirts that she'd outgrown, after making Eleven listen to the bands. Not that Max cared if Eleven liked the bands or not, she just figured that if you were going to wear a band's shirt, you should at least have heard some of their songs.

In the process of making Eleven listen to music, she'd grown rather close to her. Max wouldn't say that Eleven was her best friend, but even tomboys needed to talk to other girls once in a while. Especially after Hopper had called the Byer's house at four in the afternoon on a Sunday, when all of the Party except for Mike and Eleven had been

playing video games. Mike and Eleven were on a supervised date at the local mall, and Eleven had started her period.

“I only have tampons!” Mrs. Byers had admitted.

“I’ve got a pad,” Max offered. “I’ll ride with you to give it to her.”

When Mrs. Byers and Max had gotten to the mall, there were a couple of blown-out windows. When Max entered the bathroom to give Eleven the pad and clean underwear that Mrs. Byers had bought on the way in, Eleven had been more embarrassed about blowing out the windows in a panic than about having started her period.

“Read about it,” she admitted through the bathroom stall. “Forgot until...”

“I feel you,” Max said. “I went to my mom thinking I’d hurt myself skateboarding and she’d laughed at me for like, fifteen minutes.”

Max handed Eleven the health potion and graciously accepted the three man slingshot that Steve had bought out of a holiday magazine.

“We need to lure it somewhere where it won’t hurt anyone in town,” Hopper said. “The junkyard has a lot of cover and we can jerry-rig some weapons there if we have to, so we need to head there after you little hellions are done.”

Eleven, once she'd eaten half of the health potions, helped the boys and Max load up the truck with weapons and supplies, including a cooler filled with ice packs and the rest of the health potions.

"How big is it?" someone asked.

Eleven said, "Very. Like a big-rig."

Then, as quick as they arrived, they left. Everyone had a weapon, even Eleven. Mike, Max, and Dustin were going to man the three man slingshot, and had buckets of rocks by their feet for ammunition. Lucas had a large .308 rifle that he'd gotten really good at aiming. The Wyvern was too big for his and Dustin's combo moves, so he had elected to hunker down somewhere with a lot of protection and visibility and shoot from afar. Will had a shotgun that looked too big for him, but Eleven knew that he had steady enough feet to stay upright. Eleven, aside from her mind powers, had a very sharp, very strong machete. If anything managed to get past her mind powers, it was certain to be too close to shoot.

They arrived at the junkyard.

"How are we going to get it here?" Dustin asked while he chalked up his hands.

"I'm going to call it," Eleven said. "Be ready."

She closed her eyes and found the Wyvern again. This time, she

didn't pull away before it noticed her. Instead, she gave it the mental equivalent to a stuck-out tongue and a "come and get me!"

It responded with a roar that she heard with her ears.

"ETA four minutes," she said, opening her eyes.

Dustin said, "Shit!" and that was the rest of the Party's cue to finish getting ready. Dustin helped Mike chalk his hands, and Max loaded the slingshot with one of the medium sized rocks. She figured she'd save the bigger ones for the end.

"Three minutes."

Hopper did a last second check of Will and Lucas' guns before sending Lucas off to find a perch.

"Two minutes."

Will opened his first aid kit to check its inventory and then planted himself next to Eleven. Hopper planted himself on her other side and both raised their rifles high.

"One minute."

Lucas' voice crackled over Dustin's radio. "I see it! Christ, it's fucking ginormous! I think there's a weak spot on its belly, like Smaug, but I don't know for certain!"

The ground darkened from the shadow, and the Party finally got a real look at it. It was three times as big as the Demogorgon and had a wingspan of nearly three yards. Its face opened just like the Demogorgon and the Demodogs did, to reveal rows and rows of teeth.

Eleven sent out an image to it, of her stabbing it in the weak spot

that Lucas spotted, and it responded with a ferocious, furious roar.

“Lucas is right!” Eleven shouted. “There’s a weak spot on its belly, right under the left wing!”

“I see it!” Max shouted. “Boys, brace!”

Mike and Dustin did so, and she scrambled back, holding the pocket with a rock the size of Hopper’s fist with both hands. She held it for a second and then released. Mike and Dustin stumbled, but only after the rock had left the pocket.

The rock flew into the air, and slammed into the webbing of the Wyvern’s left wing. It careened and spiraled for a moment before righting itself.

Eleven didn’t realize she hadn’t pulled away completely from the Wyvern until she, too, stumbled and grabbed at her arm. Hopper let go of his rifle briefly, to check on her, but she waved him off.

“Again!” Eleven ordered Max.

Max reloaded the pocket and Mike and Dustin braced again. She scrambled backwards just a little farther than she had last time and held position for just a little longer and then released. Once it was in the air, the boys stumbled again but recovered quickly enough that Max was already scrambling backwards with a third rock before the second even connected.

It hit the wing again, this time with a wet snapping noise and a particularly pissed off sounding scream from the Wyvern as it fell to the ground.

A shot sounded from somewhere deeper in the junk yard. A whoop followed when the Wyvern screamed again and twisted in the air as it fell.

“I hit it!” Lucas shouted through the radio, “I got the spot!”

“It didn’t kill it!” Will shouted back.

Eleven pointed to Max. “One more. I’ll aim, you throw.”

Max gave the boys a feral grin while she backed up. “Hey, guys, who am I?”

“What?”

She let go. “I’m the gal who carries Mr. Death in her pocket!”

Eleven ignored their bickering (over whether or not it was the best quote to have made and whether or not now was the time to be making references in the first place) and concentrated on blowing the rock just enough so that it sank into the Wyvern’s chest.

It landed on the ground with an earth-rattling THUD that only paused her friends’ bickering for a few seconds. It didn’t move again.

“Jesus, kid,” her dad said. “Remind me never to get on your bad side. Or Max’s.”

Max grinned at him. “That’s why the name I use for my high scores is Mad Max!”

Dustin grumbled. “It was still a shitty reference. You could have said something about Thunderdome!”

“That wouldn’t have worked half as good as the one she did use, though!” Lucas argued.

Eleven sat down next to Max and Mike on the bed of Hopper’s truck and listened to Dustin and Lucas bicker while Max heckled. She ate a health potion, let Will check her over for injuries, and basked in the relative safety of the moment.

11. Interlude: Hopper

Hopper let the kids argue for a while he called Dr. Owens to call whoever he needed to call to get this new mess cleaned up. Dr. Owens was unhappy to hear that another thing had come into their world from the Upside Down and promised to press his people for the reason why it was still happening. Hopper told him that he'd better because if the kids had to deal with another fucking monster, he was going to hold Dr. Owens personally accountable, no matter how much he liked the man.

Once it sounded like the boys were just repeating themselves, he bundled them back into his truck and drove them to Steve's apartment. Max needed a shower, Dustin and Mike needed to wash their hands, Will needed to restock his first aid kit because Lucas had cut his arm on something, Lucas needed to wash out his cut with peroxide, and Eleven needed a damn nap.

Max took her shower, Dustin and Mike shared the kitchen sink, Will poured peroxide over Lucas' cut, Lucas yelled and complained until Will stopped, and Eleven curled up on Steve's couch with one of Nancy's quilts and promptly fell asleep.

He left Eleven with Will, because Will could be trusted to be alone with a girl unlike the rest of the boys and also because his house was in the opposite direction from Max's, Lucas', Dustin's, and Mike's houses.

"I can't believe that Max killed two of the monsters," Dustin said on the way to his house. "It's not fair that she's gotten so many kills! She's a kill thief! Who makes bad references at awful times!"

“You could have killed one, but instead you raised it,” Lucas said. “And honestly, the Mr. Death thing was perfectly timed and perfectly appropriate.”

“Fuck you, man, how was I supposed to know it was a Demodog? I thought D’art was just a weird fucking frog for a while, and then I got attached!”

“And anyway,” Max said, “Eleven helped! Didn’t she kill the Demogorgon, too? That means us girls are kicking your boys’ asses!”

“Yeah, Eleven’s a badass, but I think you might have just gotten lucky,” Mike said, which sparked a whole ‘nother argument that only stopped when he dropped Mike off at his house.

He also gave them a story to tell in case anyone asked what happened, which was that Hopper had needed to pull over a drunk driver from the city, and he’d ran past Hopper before Hopper could react and blindly attacked the person in the passenger seat, which happened to be Lucas. Hopper had then called the police from the city and they’d sent a detective to get him and bring him home.

This was all complete bullshit, of course, but Hopper met with each parent while he was dropping the kids off to confirm the story and apologize that the ride along had gone badly. Mrs. Sinclair had nearly lost her shit on him, but thankfully Lucas stopped her with a bit of extra bullshit. He’d said that Hopper had tackled the dude and cuffed him and left him on the side of the road until the city police had gotten there and made sure Lucas’ cut was clean. Hopper liked that kid a lot.

Still, he was glad to get back to Steve's apartment and the quiet of napping teenagers. He didn't wake them for a while, content to sit and breathe now that the bullshit was over and done with.

"You kids are better at this than you should be," he said Will and Eleven, who were both sleeping. Will had somehow managed to make Eleven give up some of her quilt and he was laying back to back with her. If Jonathan had been there, he would have taken a picture. "It's so fucked up that you kids have to deal with this shit."

He felt like a cliché, talking to sleeping kids about how it was messed up that they didn't get to have a proper childhood and instead had to fight monsters, so he stopped there and woke them up enough to get them back in his truck. Eleven had refused to give up the quilt, so Hopper resigned himself to either needing to apologize to Nancy or sneak it out of Eleven's room when she wasn't paying attention. The former seemed more likely.

Joyce was happy to see her son and horrified to hear that another thing from the Upside Down had come through and he'd been involved again. Hopper insisted that it didn't even touch any of the kids, which was true, and eventually she calmed back down.

She then told him that she might have to postpone their date they'd planned for tomorrow night if Will was having nightmares. Hopper understood and wouldn't have had it any other way. Kids needed their parents, and Will in particular needed Joyce. She'd been there through everything, and hadn't ever really thought he was dead or lost. Anyone could see that Will needed that steadfast assurance that everything would turn out just fine in the end, and Joyce was an expert in making things okay in the end.

He climbed back into his truck after a good twenty minutes and started towards the cabin he'd permanently moved to ever since Eleven officially became his daughter.

"Home?" Eleven asked, bundling herself in her ridiculous oversized jacket.

"Yeah, kiddo, we're going home."

12. Lucas

“Alright guys, it’s our junior year,” Lucas said to his friends, “I’m taking bets on what this year’s bullshit is going to be, starting now. My vote’s on an owlbear.”

Max said, “Lich! I’ll put a snickers down on it.”

Will said, “A Beholder for two KitKats!”

Dustin said, “A Three Musketeers on a Gelatinous Cube!”

Mike protested, “Guys, should we really be betting on this? We nearly died like, a ton of times.”

Eleven said, “Mimic for a two liter of winner’s choice of soda.”

Lucas dutifully wrote down all of their bets down in his notebook, ignoring Mike’s distressed protest. At this point, Lucas was over being scared. Mike could be scared enough for the rest of them, the worrywart.

“Alright, on this day, August twenty-third, 1987, I accept your bets and I will make you all pay up when I turn out to be right,” Lucas announced.

Dustin scoffed. “An Owlbear, though? Really, dude? The Upside Down monsters don't have fur or feathers, so how could it be an Owlbear? And besides, those things are hardly deadly!”

Lucas turned on Dustin. “I’m sorry, do you not remember that time we all had to roll new characters after Mike sic’d an Owlbear on us? Because I do. That fucking sucked.”

Dustin argued back, of course, just like Lucas expected, and they bickered until Mr. Clarke told them to settle down in homeroom.

Over the spring and summer, Lucas had pushed his friends training harder. After the Wyvern, and Mike and Dustin needing to team up to hold the giant slingshot when only Lucas and Dustin had practiced together, Lucas realized that they all needed to train together. All of them needed to be able to work with any other member of the Party.

In general, his idea had been a success. There were some pairings that just didn’t quite work even half as well as others. Like Mike and Dustin. Those two just could not coordinate to save their lives. The last time they'd tried to pair up, they'd both been hit with the enemies (old cushions) that Eleven was throwing around. Will also had a hard time working with Max, because he was support and she was a bulldozer. She inevitably got hurt (Eleven threw those old cushions really fucking hard, because she was taking their training very seriously), and Will got stressed out over it.

Lucas was eventually able to work around the Party’s limitations by permanently pairing some of their Party up. Will and Eleven were an incredible team- she could protect him while he was patching someone up and he could protect her when she needed to focus on something big. Himself and Dustin, of course. The surprise was Mike

and Max: she could charge in, and Mike was completely able to keep up with her and watch her six.

That had caused a minor fight between the resident sappy lovebirds, but had been solved by Mike shouting some gooey exclamation of love and Eleven being surprised because somehow Mike hadn't yet said the L-Word. Idiot.

So they were on the permanent buddy system from now on. Nobody was to go anywhere alone except home. He and Dustin lived within a two minute walk of each other's houses, Max and Mike lived about a three minute ride from each other's houses, and Eleven and Will were living together because Mrs. Byers and Hopper were living together now.

Lucas had actually enjoyed helping Eleven and Hopper move into the Byer's household. Hopper had some cool stuff stashed away. He'd even let them ferret some of the stuff he didn't care about away into their own pockets.

"Oh, jeez," he'd said when Dustin had held up an old Boy Scouts' manual, "Get rid of that thing. Jesus Christ, that makes me feel old."

After that, they'd all started holding up stuff they thought was cool in hopes that Hopper would let them have it. In the end, they'd acquired a rusty Swiss army knife, three empty whiskey bottles, a plastic bag full of washers, a hunting bow missing the string, the old boy scouts manual, and three yards of rope.

Lucas had taken the bow and the washers home, because his dad

would be happy that he's finally trying out a sport, even if it's a weird one like archery. Plus, Lucas figured that a bow and arrow was a better weapon against the Upside Down monsters than a dinky wrist rocket.

The washers he turned into a kind of half-assed set of chainmail armor because he hadn't seen the demodogs eat metal, so he was hoping that the washers would be thick enough for him to not get eaten.

The one downside was that his chainmail was ridiculously heavy. He'd let his friends try his on, in case they wanted one, but only Dustin and Mike could wear it and not be completely weighed down.

"Of course the paladin can wear armor," Will complained, "But the cleric over here is stuck being demon bait."

"I won't let anything eat you," Eleven said, "don't worry."

Will turned to Eleven and said, "Actually, thank you! At least somebody here cares about the healer!"

Lucas had rolled his eyes because he knew Will was being dramatic. They'd gone through hell to get him out of the Upside Down, and then even more hell to get the fucking Mind Flayer out of his brain. Will knew they appreciated him. He had to.

The buddy system ended up working for more than just the Upside

Down bullshit, to Lucas' surprise.

Last year, none of them had cared enough about their social lives to really be bothered by the bullies. It had been awesome, actually, because the bullies had stopped picking on them at some point. This year, the bullies upped their game from words and pushing and shoving to physical assault.

The worst part about all of this was when Jacobi Kensey had tried to attack Max. Max had screamed and pitched a fit but he was, unfortunately, physically stronger than she was and had gotten far enough as to pin her to the wall.

Lucas had been so angry when he'd heard about this that he'd wanted to go after the bastard and murder him, even though Eleven had gotten there first and fast.

See, Lucas had brought up that they needed a better way of communicating with each other because their radios were fallible. So, Will and Eleven had polished up her mind powers enough that she could hear your thoughts if you shouted a particular phrase.

Dustin had helped Lucas come up with their codes, so it was pretty thorough. Code Red meant there was a monster that needed taking care of. Code Yellow meant that someone needed immediate help with something important. Code Green meant "I want to meet up" and they would follow that with someone's name.

So when Eleven had heard Max screaming out, "Code Yellow, Code Yellow!" She'd come running with Dustin in tow.

Lucas was still so angry that he'd been too far away to help, but had been satisfied that Dustin and Eleven had done enough damage to Jacobi Kensey to send the bastard to the hospital.

Unfortunately, his parents had called the cops. Fortunately, Hopper showed up, asked questions, and promptly told Mr. and Mrs. Kensey that their son had tried to sexually assault a second girl and that girl had merely defended herself.

"Good job, kiddo," he'd said to Eleven, and then to Max, "you okay? You know you can press charges, right?"

Max shrugged from her spot against Lucas' side. "If he does it again, we'll just throw him off a cliff or something."

Lucas had agreed and volunteered to be the one to do it, but it was decided that the honor would go to Will, since he'd supposedly died from falling off a cliff himself. Lucas had reluctantly agreed that it would be more fitting if Will was to do it, even though the bastard had hurt Lucas' girlfriend and not Will's.

Still, life continued on as usual. They went to school five days a week, played D&D on Saturdays, trained every other day in the woods by Hopper's old cabin, went home to their families each night, and waited for the next Upside Down monster to come into their world.

But as fall passed into winter, there was still no sign of the Upside

Down. Christmas passed without much fuss (Lucas got a new, fancy bow and arrow set complete with a hip quiver and a bracer for his arm). New Years went by (Lucas and Max kissed when the ball fell on the TV), Valentines Day was a hot mess (Lucas got Max some chocolates filled with things, but it turned out that she was allergic to coconut), and so on.

“I don’t like this,” Lucas said after their latest D&D session had ended, “This waiting.”

“Me neither, man,” Will agreed.

Lucas shook his head. “Something’s gotta happen, right? We’re not being paranoid for no reason? That Wyvern wasn’t the last monster to come out. It can’t have been.”

“I agree.”

Just after Will had finished speaking, Dustin came out of Mike’s house at last, and he and Lucas waved goodbye to Will and started on home.

Lucas wasn’t able to shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen very soon, not even when he curled up under his covers to sleep.

13. Mike & Dustin

Mike and Dustin knew that they did not get along alone. They liked each other a lot: Dustin thought Mike was really smart and clever, and Mike thought Dustin was funny and charismatic. But leave them alone or force them to work together without a third person and everything turned into chaos. This was most particularly evidenced by the Volcano Project Disaster of Sixth Grade.

“Dustin, Michael,” Mr. Clarke has said during the Chemistry unit of their middle school science class, “I’m pairing you two up for this next project.”

“Mr. Clarke!” Dustin protested.

“No, no,” Mr. Clarke said, holding up his hand, “You always work with Dustin and Michael always works with Will. I know the four of you are good friends, but I’ve yet to see you two work together, just the two of you.”

Mike and Dustin shared a horrified glance, and that’s how the Volcano Project Disaster of Sixth Grade came about. Mr. Clarke learned his lesson and never paired the two of them up again and also never let Dustin near baking soda ever again and made both him and Mike clean up the mess after school as detention.

Unfortunately, Mr. Clarke hadn’t been able to convince other teachers not to pair them up, which had lead to much more minor disasters throughout their schooling. The latest disaster to be came from Mrs. Jackson, who was forcing her students to pair up and write short stories together as a teamwork exercise. Mike and Dustin were,

unfortunately, paired together.

"I hate this," Dustin complained. "She's going to know you're doing all of the work. At least let me write, Mike!"

"No, you said I'm the better writer so I should write," Mike said, "So I'm going to write and I'll write whatever shitty plot you come up with."

"I don't even have a plot!" Dustin shouted. "I hate English class! I hate Mrs. Jackson! Why does she always give these bullshit kind of assignments? I wish I had that other lady for this stupid fucking class!"

Max groaned. "Can you two stop arguing for five seconds?"

"Please," Lucas agreed.

Will tilted his head thoughtfully, and Mike zeroed in on him. He knew that expression meant Will had an idea, and Will's ideas were usually good.

"What if," Will said, "we all write the story of what's happening with the Upside Down?"

"But it's supposed to be fiction," Eleven said. She was paired up with Will for the writing project and she had turned out to be the biggest

stickler for following instructions for any and all assignments. She'd been the only one any of them had ever known to pass that test where the only real instructions were to write your name at the top of the page and the rest were bullshit instructions made to trip you up. Mr. Clarke gave a variation of it every year, and Mike had failed it the first two years because he got impatient. Dustin failed three years in a row before he learned.

Mike had an idea that the reason why she was such a stickler for following instructions used to have her call him Papa, but hated thinking about that. He sometimes wondered if she actually hated school and only pretended to like it for their sakes, but then he'd remember that she's actually a pretty terrible liar.

Will grinned. "Well, Mrs. Jackson isn't going to know that this actually happened, is she? Eleven, you and me can write like, what did she call it, parallel plots, from when I was trapped there and you escaped the lab! It'll be really cool, I promise!"

Eleven nodded slowly. "Okay. Sounds good."

"Dibs on the Demodogs!" Lucas said.

Max punched the air. "Sweet!"

Dustin and Mike looked at each other skeptically. No matter what, this wasn't going to go well, but it did seem to be the hardest thing to screw up.

Mike said, "Wyvern?"

Dustin nodded. "Wyvern. You write the first draft for accuracy and detail, I'll write the second and add in some humor, and then we can work on the last draft together?"

Mike agreed reluctantly.

They had to meet at Dustin's house because his mom always had the TV up loud enough that she couldn't hear their arguing, so they could shout at each other all they wanted. This was a good arrangement, and Dustin was honestly surprised they hadn't thought of just yelling at each other before this project. Mike agreed.

The "first" draft they turned in was terrible, of course, because their teacher thought it was too violent and wasn't literary enough, which made both of them want to scream. But she'd made it bleed terrifying red ink and they, at Mike's insistence, changed some things with her notes in mind.

"But that's not how it happened!" Dustin insisted.

"That doesn't matter," Mike argued. "It's fiction, now. We have to do this how she says to do it or we'll get a bad grade."

So they did it, and turned in their second draft, which was returned to them not nearly as red as the first one, and they edited it together again, arguing the entire time.

Their third and final draft was actually decent, Mrs. Jackson said, and told them she was going to submit it to a junior fiction contest, and the winner would receive \$50. She also said she would give each of them \$25 to be fair, because of course both of them did the same amount of work, right?

So she sent it off, and Mike and Dustin went to the ice cream shop to celebrate their first successful project together.

“You should keep a record of all of these instances,” Dustin told Mike over his fudge chocolate ice cream. “Cause like, if we end up doing this for years, we’re not going to remember everything we’ve fought, right? And we could always use like, a list of things that did and didn’t work, you know.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Mike admitted.

That night, of course, the idea of a written record wouldn’t leave him alone. At around two thirty in the morning, he gave up and hauled himself out of bed. Finding a blank composition book wasn’t difficult, and he scrawled down a basic rundown of what had happened each year. At around three forty-five, he was satisfied and crawled back into bed to sleep.

The next day, of course, he regretted being up so late and came to school staggering like the undead. Will fussed over him and told him he should have gone to sleep earlier while Eleven just gave him an extremely judging stare.

“Sorry, guys, I had one of those nights where the idea wouldn’t leave

me alone. I had to write it down or I wasn't going to sleep at all," Mike said sheepishly, then added, scathingly, "Thanks, Dustin."

Dustin raised his hands defensively. "Damn, dude, if I thought it would bother you that much, I wouldn't have said anything in the first damn place."

Mike didn't respond to Dustin and instead placed the composition notebook on Will's desk and continued, "I have everything that I remember written down in here. I had to guess at some of the times and dates, and I made notes of things that I wasn't present for."

"Why'd you only write on one side of the page?" Eleven asked. "That's inefficient."

Mike shook his head. "It's in case anyone wants to add notes. Just remember to write your name under it, so we all know. I'm going to make a copy and keep it in the fireproof lockbox my weird uncle gave me a few years ago, in case anything happens to this one."

Dustin read through it, and he had to say he was impressed at the detail Mike remembered from everything. He'd always known that Mike was annoying about being a stickler for details, but he'd never thought it would ever be actually useful like this.

"Jesus, dude, how do you even like, remember this?" Lucas asked. "I can't even remember what I ate for dinner last night!"

Mike shrugged. “Good memory, I guess? I’ve always been like that. Why do you think my campaigns are so damn good, huh?”

They spent the rest of their lunch period, which they miraculously had together this year, pouring over the notebook and pointing out any inaccuracies they could find. This of course turned into a competition, which Eleven won at fourteen details not written quite correctly.

14. max

Max was pretty pissed that she was the victim of the bullshit this year. She had sincerely thought that she was the most normal of the Party and because she was the most normal, she was least likely to fall victim to the Upside Down bullshit. She was particularly fucking upset that it had to be her because frankly, being literally swallowed whole and spat back out was probably the worst experience of her life and she wished it had happened to literally anyone but her. (Or Will, because Max had to admit that he'd been through fucking plenty with the Mind Flayer.)

It started like this:

Max skated home from school, accompanied by Mike on his ridiculous bicycle. He'd just added a black, spray-painted milk crate to the handlebars as a basket and it was really fucking ugly, in Max's opinion. An actual basket, one of those wicker ones, she was sure they were called, would have looked better and functioned just as well to hold his radio while he was biking. Maybe not as "manly" or whatever, but less ugly.

Mike rode directly into his garage as usual, and Max hopped off of her skateboard to cut through his backyard and the woods to get to her house as usual. She got home easily enough, gave Billy his daily glare to keep him in line, and went to her bedroom to relax until her mom and stepdad got home.

Of course, that's when things started going wrong: her mom and stepdad arrived home screaming at each other. Max sent Eleven a

mental Code White to indicate that she wasn't in trouble but could be at some point and ventured out into the living room to maybe rescue her mom by asking for help with something she didn't actually need help with.

Max's timing, of course, just had to be shit at that moment, and she was struck on the shoulder with a plate the second she stepped into the living room. She'd rolled with the hit like the martial arts books Lucas checked out had said to, but the plate shattered on the bony part of her shoulder, and stung sharply where it had broken.

"Maxine!" her mom shouted. "Oh my god, baby, I'm so sorry, let me drive you to the hospital! Look what you've done, Neil! If you hadn't-!"

Her stepdad waved at Max angrily. "What I did, Susan? Look what you did! I didn't throw anything, now did I? That was all you, Susan!"

Max poked her shoulder to check for damages and winced while they screamed at each other some more. Her hand came away bloody, to her surprise. She really had not thought it had hit her that hard, which might just have been a testament to the training she'd been doing with the boys and Eleven. She couldn't wait to brag to the boys (but mostly Dustin, because he was kind of a crybaby) that she hadn't even flinched a bit when she'd gotten hurt.

"I'm going to Will's house, mom," Max said loudly, "He's got a really good first aid kit and he knows what he's doing. It's just a couple of scratches."

That statement pulled her mother away from her argument with Neil briefly. "No, baby, I'm taking you to the hospital! It looks terrible! You might need stitches!"

Max rolled her eyes. "Mom, Will's patched up worse than this. One time, Dustin sliced his arm open on a knife and it bled everywhere and Will was like, 'hold on, let me super glue that shut.' Apparently, that's what actual doctors do sometimes with wounds that need stitches and when Dustin went to the school nurse the next day, she said he was fine and that the doctor did a good job, so..."

Her mom gave her a skeptical look. "Are you sure, baby?"

"Yes, mom! Lucas made him prove it was a thing that doctors did before he let Will do it. Will handed him a photocopy from a book at the library about..." Max paused. "Shit, what was it called...?"

"Maxine! Language!"

Max remembered and snapped her fingers. "Lacerations! I promise, mom. And if he can't fix it, then I'll call you and we can go to the hospital, okay?"

Her mom pursed her lips but eventually said, "Okay, fine. But let Billy drive you? It's awfully dark out to be walking around alone out here."

Max grimaced. "Mom, I'll really be fine. Look, it's hardly bleeding anymore."

Her mother shook her head. "No, Maxine, you need a ride. Billy, will you drive her to her friend's house?"

Max wanted to argue that they didn't live in the city anymore and she would be fine, but she knew that once her mother went over her head with orders, there was no arguing with her. Max was not getting in that car with her asshole stepbrother, though, not in a million years.

"Yes ma'am," Billy said with the fakest smile imaginable on his face. Max lifted her lip in disgust at him, but she went outside with him just as her mother insisted.

"I'm not getting in that fucking car with you," Max said once they were outside. "I'm walking. Go harass some lady at the bar, or something, but fuck off and tell mom that you drove me to Will's house and Mrs. Byers offered to make you tea, okay?"

Max had long since learned the necessity of a cover story, and she knew Billy had too. He'd regurgitate the story when prompted by her mother.

Billy snorted. "I don't want you in my car in the first place. I have a date tonight, so make your friend's mom drive you home or something so Susan doesn't freak out on me."

"Fine by me," Max said.

In hindsight, her first mistake was not making Billy drive her. Her second mistake was not going to Mike's house first, and in failing to do so, abandoning the buddy system.

She trudged, and jeez that felt like a cliché word to use, but really, it's what she did, through the woods. Will's house was a five minute drive away, but it was a thirty minute walk away. When she'd told her mom that her wound wasn't bleeding that bad, she'd been telling the truth, but it was still bleeding a little harder than she'd have liked.

She thought hard in Eleven's direction, Code Green, Will and Eleven. I'm walking towards your place, ETA twenty seven minutes.

Eleven's presence appeared not a moment later. Her voice echoed in Max's head, Acknowledged. Status?

Max groaned. Of course Eleven would know something was up. I'm bleeding a little. Might need some superglue.

Code Yellow, then. We'll meet you. Will has his kit, Eleven said, and then her presence vanished.

"Ugh," Max said, and kept trudging.

She walked for another fifteen minutes in the cold, clutching her bleeding and sticky shoulder before the Incident began. Her third

mistake was freezing.

It had been dark in the woods, but she blinked and then everything was black and she couldn't breathe and she was being squeezed all around and it smelled like bile and her skin was tingling the way Mr. Clarke had described that acids tingled as an indication that they should run for the chemical shower to get it off and

It occurred to Max that something had swallowed her whole, and she screamed out to Eleven, CODE RED, CODE RED!

Almost as suddenly as she'd been swallowed, she was back out on the ground, this time sticky not just from blood but also from the Upside Down yuck and spit from the thing that had swallowed her.

She saw Will and Eleven standing opposite of her. Will had his kit, and Eleven's nose was dripping blood over her angrily bared teeth.

"What the fuck!" Max shouted, running towards and behind Eleven and Will, "It came out of fucking nowhere!"

Eleven screamed at the thing. Will opened his kit and wordlessly cleaned Max's arm and applied superglue while Eleven held the thing back.

"The others are on their way," Will said, "ETA three minutes for Dustin and Lucas, one minute for Mike. Do you have a weapon we can fight this thing with?"

Max cursed. “No!”

Will sighed and handed her the spare nail bat he’d been carrying that Max hadn’t noticed. “I would have brought Jonathan, but he left with Nancy and Steve again last night. Will this do?”

“It’s perfect,” Max said, snatching it away. “What’s the plan?”

“Stay away from the mouth if you can,” Will said dryly, “and hit it away from El while she’s doing her thing. Dustin’s got a canister of gasoline in the trunk of his car and we’re going to light this fucker up the second he gets here.”

Max nodded. “Distract then burn, got it!”

15. will & eleven

At this point, Will mused as he hit the Beholder with his nail bat to distract it from Max, he didn't even know why he bothered to hope that things would leave him and his friends alone. He really didn't. At this point, he felt he should just expect nonsense to show up on his literal and metaphorical back porch.

At least he won the bet.

The nails sank into the thing's skin, and it screeched when Will yanked and tore a hole in its side. It screamed and thrashed until Will was flung a few feet away. It lunged for him, mouth wide open and its million tiny teeth glinting in the moonlight as he dove just barely out of its reach.

Frankly, Will was quite delighted with the fact that he'd won the bet. Sure, it wasn't a floating ball of eyes that happened to also have a mouth. But none of the Upside Down monsters had had eyes yet, so he figured a spherical monster with many mouths and walking on four tall, thin, spindly legs was a close enough analogue to a beholder that the Upside Down could possibly produce.

Mostly, though, he was glad he won the bet because he too remembered that Owlbear that Mike had sic'd on them, and he was not eager to meet the real-life Upside Down version of it any time soon, no thank you sir!

Eleven saw the Beholder lunge for her brother and screamed. She threw it against the biggest tree she could see because there was no way she was going to let it eat her fucking brother, absolutely not!

But it was slippery, and squeezed out of her mental grasp after just a few moments of struggling.

"Hold it still!" Max shouted, brandishing the nail bat Will had handed her. "I can't hit it!"

"It's slippery!" Eleven shouted back. "I can't hold on to it for long!"

"Max, pay attention!" Will screamed and sank his nail bat into the Beholder's side, catching a mouth, when it tried to lunge for her.

The sound of kicked leaves and shoes on damp dirt approached them. Eleven sent out a quick feeler, to identify them, and sighed in relief when she recognized the soft but steady presence of Mike, the wild and quick presence of Dustin, and the focused and sharp presence of Lucas.

"Hello, friends, the cavalry's arrived!" Dustin announced with a toss of something brightly lit and glassy that promptly shattered and exploded on the Beholder.

It screamed and thrashed harder than it had before, trying to shake off the sticky fire covering half of its body. It succeeded after it collapsed into a mud puddle, and got back on its feet, screeching loud enough for all of them to need to grab their ears to block it out.

"Holy shit," Will shouted when it was done and lunging for Eleven, who tossed it at a tree again, "Did you make fucking molotov

cocktails!?"

Dustin, predictably, cackled and threw another one. "I've got three more! If you can get its mouth open, I'll toss one in there and see if we can roast it from the inside!"

Eleven looked at Will in confusion. She didn't know where Dustin had acquired supplies for molotov cocktails, and wasn't sure that she wanted to, but she shrugged and grabbed at the Beholder once more and pried open its biggest mouth as best she could.

He threw one, and missed by about six feet. Mike screamed, because he was closest, and struggled to put it out before it burned the whole forest down.

"What the fuck, Dustin! Aim!" Will shouted.

"I am aiming!" Dustin shouted in return. "Shut up and let me concentrate!"

Eleven grunted. "Hurry up!"

He threw another one, hitting the Beholder this time, but not in its mouth. It thrashed under Eleven's grasp and nearly slipped away. She felt her nose start to bleed.

"Dustin, come on!" she yelled. She hadn't bled for months, not even

when lifting the heaviest damn things her friends could find. “I can’t hold on much longer!”

“Fuck, man, gimme that,” Lucas said, snatching the last cocktail from Dustin’s hand. “I don’t know why I agreed to let you throw these in the first fucking place!”

Lucas threw the last Molotov cocktail, and just barely managed to hit the Beholder’s tongue. Eleven snapped its mouth shut like it was a crocodile. It rolled like one, and almost slipped out of Eleven’s grasp several times. She focused all of her attention on keeping it where she wanted it and held on until her nose was dripping blood from both nostrils.

She felt when it went lax, dead, and she finally allowed herself to let go of it. Her knees buckled, but Mike was there, holding her up before she could fall.

Will was very tired. He wanted to go home, curl up under his blankets, and sleep for about a week. But he couldn’t, because he had to patch up his friends and make sure nobody was bleeding out.

Max was injured previous to being eaten by the Beholder, so he went to her first. He wiped her wounds clean with baby wipes, dumped some peroxide to clear out any debris inside of the wound, and then superglued the small cuts from whatever had hurt her shut.

Eleven just needed a health potion and a few tissues for her nose, and Mike carried those for her, so Will went to the rest of his friends.

“So,” Lucas said, “I might have twisted my ankle on the way here.”

“Goddamn it, Lucas,” Will said, and started poking at his friend’s foot. Lucas hissed in pain, but Will couldn’t feel anything broken. He shook his head and pulled out the now-familiar ace bandage to wrap around Lucas’ ankle.

“Man, don’t they make those things in more colors than ‘vaguely tan

white man’?” Lucas complained.

Will shook his head. “Nope. This is the only color you can get, at least here. I don’t know about anywhere else. Okay, easy on that foot, alright? If you’re going to bike home, let your other foot do the work. Or else.”

Lucas held his hands high, admitting defeat in the face of their healer.

“And you,” Will said, turning to point his finger at Dustin. “Where the hell did you get Molotov cocktails? Do you know how dangerous those are? What if you’d hit Mike instead of just barely missing him when you spectacularly failed to hit the Beholder?”

Dustin laughed nervously. “I saw it in a movie, and Hopper gave us those whiskey bottles, so I got my mom to buy a bunch of rubbing alcohol cause it was on sale, and I figured out how to rig up Molotov cocktails.”

Will threw his hands into the air, exasperated. “Jesus Christ! Alright, Dustin, you’re banned from throwing explosives ever again. Lucas, make sure Dustin doesn’t ever throw anything explosive ever again, got it?”

Dustin pouted and tried to argue about how cool it had been, but Lucas put his hand on his face to shut him up and said to Will, “You got it, man!”

“Is anyone else injured?” Will asked loudly. “Or can we all go home now?”

“We can go home now,” Eleven said.

Will nodded, and then remembered something. “Oh, by the way, you all owe me because I won the bet. I expect payment by Monday night, thank you!”

As he expected, his friends groaned and tried to argue or barter their ways out, but he shook his head with a smug grin on his face. He won that bet fair and fucking square, and he was going to cash out.

